Under Seeing

An approach to feeling and sensing performance

experiencing works by the BodyCartography Project

by Olive Bieringa, Margit Galanter, Justin Jones, Arwen Wilder, and Asher Edes

Olive Bieringa, choreographer: My work exists in the encounter between audience and performer. I'm interested in what new social relationships we can build if we pay close attention to how our bodies might feel their way around each other. Following are reflections from performers and audience of two recent works—*action movie* and *felt room*. Both pieces offer the possibility to practice being present in the unknown and to transform the way we feel and sense our world.

action movie

action movie was originally a pedagogical exercise that I created with BodyCartography collaborator Otto Ramstad 20 years ago, inspired by our work with Tuning Score creator Lisa Nelson. We taught the exercise in dance workshops around the world, specifically those oriented to site work and filmmaking. More recently, I was looking for a one-on-one performance score that would bring audiences inside the heart of a dance and invite them to question how they experience the world through all of their being—both feeling and sensing.

In 2016, I transformed the exercise into *action movie*, a performance for Vital Matters Dance Festival, Southern Theater, Minneapolis, MN. *action movie* is a site-responsive tour in which a single performer guides an audience-of-one through a neighborhood, public building, or museum. At the beginning, the performer proposes to the audience that they will guide them through the space and invite them to open and close their eyes. What follows is a 15-minute immersive cinematic experience that is vastly different each time it is performed.

action movie has been performed with kids and adults in theaters, onstage, backstage, in lobbies, in museums, and in surrounding neighborhoods in the U.S., New Zealand, and Norway. The score is simple. The casting is key. People I have invited to perform the work have training in dance, improvisation, and somatics. It is essential that they have the capacity to generate movement from their own internal experience. They must have some degree of comfort in working in an intimate nonverbal context with a complete stranger in order to facilitate this person's experience.

The dancers have a script. Here is a version for the museum:

> *"Hello, I'm.... We are going to take a walk through the galleries. I'm going to guide and take care of you and give you my full attention. Sometimes I will invite you to open and close your eyes by saying OPEN and CLOSE and finally END. Sometimes you will be walking with your eyes closed, and in order to keep you and the artwork safe, we will lead you by holding your arm, hand, or back like this [performer demonstrates touch]. Is this OK? Do you have any mobility issues? Any hearing issues? OK, let's begin."*

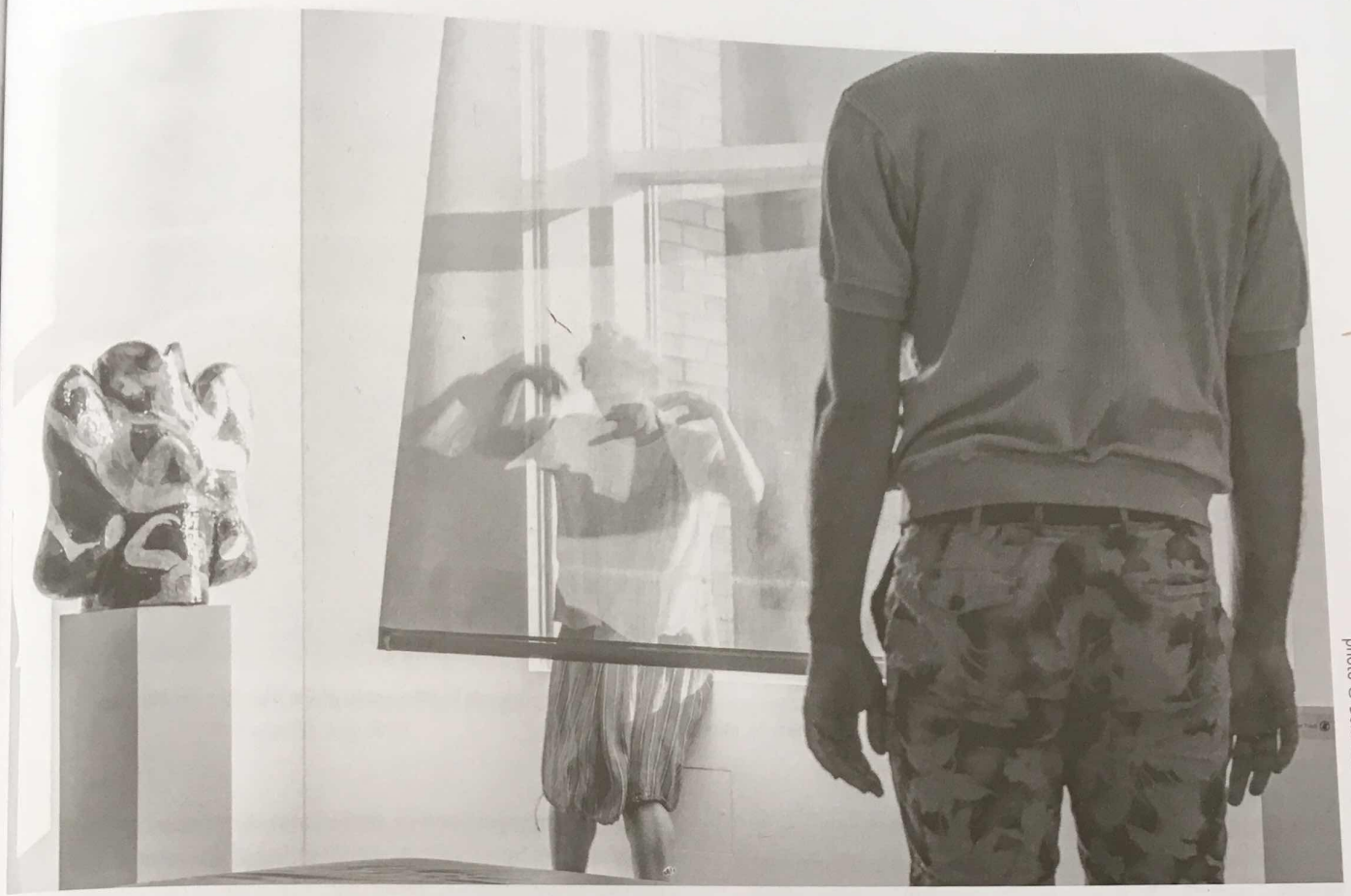

photo © Boris Oicherman

Dancer Anna Marie Shogren and onlooker in *action movie*. Weisman Art Museum, Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis, July 2018.

We practice the score with each other. Being audience ourselves is vital in understanding how the work will be received. We each develop different strategies as we perform the work and share these with each other. Each space offers different opportunities.

To prepare, I share tips and scores that address ways of communicating through touch, somatic transmission and facilitation, compositional framing, shifting of perspective, timing, sensory awareness, and social dynamics. For instance:

- set up a rhythm with your calling and then break/shift it.
- shift the visual field: be the protagonist/object; reveal empty space, others; or be together—e.g., lying on the ground looking up at the sky.
- be specific in your call timing and tone—e.g., cut the visual before you finish the image.
- no talking.

[O.B.]

Reflection on *action movie*

Margit Galanter, performer:

Fresh out of the experience of *action movie*, a one-on-one performance at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March 2018, I wrote stream-of-consciousness notes to be shared with other participating artists and on a Facebook feed. Here, it is modified to be legible beyond its initially intended readership.

We slide down over the steps, waists folded over the smooth handrails. As I gently direct my partner's elbow and forearm, we arrive at the wide wooden terraced steps of the museum's amphitheater-esque lobby #3. From here, Richard Serra's massive rust elegance (Sequence, *2006) rises into visibility...well, for me. My partner's eyes are closed, so they haven't actually seen the sculpture yet. Their steps have been becoming more able, more stable, as we traverse the museum. We end up sitting next to one another, sides of our bodies close, palpable through the layers of clothes. There's a warmth and a subtle compression of the space shared. Weight settling, gentle breathing. I start to listen anew and notice the cacophonous white noise din of the museum.*

With the sculpture now on our immediate horizon, in front of a massive set of windows overlooking San Francisco's bustling Third Street, I call "open."

action movie took place primarily in the free and open public areas of SFMOMA. Anyone could participate if they knew where to wait on line or how to sign up, or just happened to stand in the right place. But, I wonder, who actually enters? The museum is a vast hyper-institution in the economically fraught and exponentially gentrified city of San Francisco. It costs $25 to enter—a huge fee for most. What does it mean to present free performance in this 'public art in a private context'?

photo © Boris Oicherman

Dancer Emma Barber and onlooker in *action movie*. Rooftop café at the Weisman Art Museum, Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis, July 2018.

My own fascination with art and live-performance practice over the decades tends to draw me in to the subtle channels that art could but does not always offer. I am interested in the invisible dynamics and atmospherics—the context and life of the people who make the art, the cultural aspects from which the work grows and assembles to be presented, and the sensations of it all. Which hegemonic forces—supremacism, consumption, hetero-patriarchy—are implicit in the work? Furthermore, how do these power-based operations intermingle with the sensorial and lived experiences of the production of and participation in the work?

From my perspective, *action movie* intended to open something up by a facilitated enlivening of different spaces. After encountering the generosity of curator Frank Smigiel and choreographer Olive Bieringa's approach of working together, I experienced genuine efforts of community outreach and innovation—yet the system is just so powerful. When I feel jaded, my belief is that populist art in a museum is at worst a way for large institutions and art groups to fulfill their grant requirements and to appear *with it*. Or, more dangerous, they subsume and appropriate the ecosystems and economics of actual community arts, further supported with the development of new monikers in the field and nuances to approach, such as "social practice"

Reflection on *action movie*
Justin Jones, performer:

I initially thought I would be editing together a series of dance sequences—a walking montage with the visual experience at the foreground and the eyes-closed bits the less important, waiting time. What I learned was that the eyes-closed moments were the primary material, allowing the audience member to quickly engage in a nonvisual feeling state, attention spreading down and sideways, with smell, temperature, and sound becoming the primary compositional material, which I took great pleasure in choreographing. The visual sequences (eyes open) were then moments for surprise, rest, connection, reentry, attenuation, and then, eyes closed, the dive back into the undersenses for something more real, more connected, more human.

photo © Boris Oicherman

Dancer Sarah Baumert and onlooker in the gallery, in *action movie*. Weisman Art Museum, Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis, July 2018.

and "relational aesthetics." Experimental work in institutional contexts can offer novelty through representation rather than structural change. It usefully creates a forum for dance artists to be paid and supported for their labor. At best, participatory work in a museum provides tools expanding beyond the habituated art consumption model, so people can experience art in a new way. In reality, it's probably all of these forces commingling.

As I was guiding each *action movie*, I could actually feel all these valences, both cultural and experiential, as we moved through the space.

SFMOMA's architecture directs museumgoers to multiple stores and cafés on every level—an art world shopping mall. We are invited to support its very presence at every turn; the experience of commodification is inextricable to every aspect of this place. Acceptance is not consent...or is it? Is presence an expression of complicity? Does artistic participation release us from this mechanism in any way? Can we trust that to be intimate with someone, a stranger, to dissolve some social boundary, changes something? Does live composition and a shift in perceptual experience create an o p e n i n g and give relief beyond the momentary?

In *action movie,* we walked side by side. We got very still. We sat and listened and experienced forming images. In advance, I got consent to touch my partner in guiding them through the space and framing scenes. I said "close" and "open." Through the quieting and shifting of states, I found myself drawn to the unique and subtle expressions of my partners. I hesitated to show myself too much; rather, I got more simple, gave space because there was so much to feel-see. Sometimes I felt communion and sometimes awkwardness—was it me or what we created together?

It felt as if we became a part of the environment at times. Once, we were looking out the window, and it was as if we became a part of the architecture; in one group, we joined with another *action movie* pair nestled in a door frame; and in another, our frame intersected with the one in red dancing through a window for his partner—seated, eyes open; we listened to the sounds of birds in flock flying up to the skyline on the outdoor patio. So many beautiful images.

I learned from the people I guided around in intimate duets, or really, intimate trios: we two and the museum spaces. Or quartets: the two people and the artworks and the space. Or quartets: the two people, their sense of place-as-it-changed, and the two-of-us-as-we-became-a-shared-discovering-organism. Or perhaps quintets: the two people and the artworks and the space and the implicit power structure. Art can do this. Sensory-perceptual exploration does this.

Lisa Nelson's Tuning Scores, from which the *action movie* score is derived, offer sensorial practices that dissolve the insider-outsider perception of an act. To tune is to experience the elements and subtle details of movement, performance, and communication, and to tune is to experience the multi-sensoriality of an image. The particular score of *action movie* had an elegant simplicity that enabled

the participants to see the space uniquely and explore in a way that experientially opened up the museum, an environment that ordinarily can perpetuate isolationism, privilege, cult of authorship, and therefore a kind of detachment.

Bringing my dance partners into the museum stores with their eyes closed, framing multi-sensorial "films" in which they touched the products "in the dark," somehow momentarily shifted the relationship with objects for sale into sense-based materials, a kind of leveling effect. This perceptual subversion of hierarchies is foundational to Tuning and reaches into a space like a museum—highlighting invisible dynamics, to be recognized or not by the participants.

It takes a kind of courage to participate in *action movie*—to be facilitated "blindly" by someone one has never met. Participants tried out ways of moving that they had likely never done before in the museum. The guards were informed to allow us to move through the space as one usually does not in a museum. This allowed for physical exploration with one less layer of control. Some people felt emboldened to run and move and experience the space with a sense of play because they had "permission," because the actions were framed as art. This kind of physical play can elicit a sense of wonder less accessible in the gait of a regular museumgoer, who often has the composure of a serious student.

Through being conscious in moving, in stillness, and re-situating through the art, I am making choices about where I put myself in relation to others and the space. This kind of agency can be a set of operations and skills that, over time and in practice, affect other orders of operation: how I choose to situate my work, the felt sense of the arc of making art, and embodied and engaged perspectives about what I seek to create. This is one way that physicality is inextricably linked to the production of culture and deserves attention. Somehow this attending is a key element in creating effervescent spaces that may prefigure and transform culture.

Interestingly, BodyCartography's events were the last of the performances that will be taking place at SFMOMA for the time being. Curation and funding have shifted. I am left wondering what kinds of traces were left in the building and in the body-beings of those who participated.

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felt room

Olive Bieringa, choreographer:

felt room plunges viewers into the midst of the dancers in an open and often completely dark space with no seating; the proximity of the dancers is heard and felt as much as seen. *felt room*, an immersive three-hour performance installation, is designed to conjure imagination and speculation. In the darkness, viewers are offered an escape from a world of constant illumination in which to practice other ways of knowing. Like human animals moving in the night, the dance slowly reveals itself. The dancers (sometimes five, sometimes seven) engage in a series of movement tasks that generate particular spatial and sensorial qualities, ranging from stillness to high activity, silent to sounding, interactive to personal. One example is to move between inner and outer attention following the fluid rhythm of your autonomic nervous system. Our role is to bring people into a physical state. Through its often visual absence, punctuated by occasional flashes of light and deeply saturated color, the dance becomes heightened in the imagination. There are few handles in the dark or ways to mark time. In the intimacy created by darkness, audience and performer are both hidden and vulnerable. Together we share fluid time, a space for napping, lucid dreaming, visioning, and collective imagining.

In *felt room*, audiences are informed that the room will often be very dark and that sometimes the dancers might brush against them or touch their hands. If they don't want contact, they are invited to move away. If we don't feel that someone wants to be touched, we move away. If we don't want to be touched, we move away. The work creates a space of ambiguity, an invitation for both performers and audience to take responsibility for our actions. Each of our choices of where to sit and where to look may have a profound consequence for everyone in the space. Each choice is at once personal and compositional.